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# CHRISTIAN REALISM'S RESPONSE TO INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

by

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## *Preface*

I became interested in the topic of Christian Realism when it became apparent during Air Command and Staff College lectures on International Relations that political realism's understanding of human nature had its roots in the Biblical doctrine of original sin. I then discovered from assigned readings that there was a Christian version of political realism, and so the idea of pursuing independent research into this area was born. The fact that Christian Realism's foremost writer was Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian of whom I had often heard but never had the opportunity to study was an added bonus. Given the historic implications of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it seemed appropriate to direct the focus of my study of Christian Realism towards a response to international terrorism.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Paul Kan for serving as my faculty research advisor. His genuine interest in the topic, as well as his understanding of both political realism and the work of Reinhold Niebuhr provided invaluable direction. I also found the staff at the Air University library to be extremely helpful, always ready to go beyond a simple answer to make sure I had all the resources required. Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Pamela Hollabaugh for her expert training and assistance in putting this paper into the proper format.

### ***Abstract***

What moral framework does Christian Realism provide Christian chaplains and commanders as they determine a proper military response to international terrorism? One of the primary tasks of a chaplain is to advise commanders on issues of morality. The majority of Air Force officers consider themselves to be religious. A majority of these would call themselves Christian. The Christian Gospel is often misunderstood in terms of its relationship to government and especially the role of the military. This problem is compounded when confronting international terrorism, which bases its extremism on the religious principles of Islam.

The foremost Christian writer on issues related to political thought in the twentieth century was Reinhold Niebuhr. The paper begins with an historical and theological introduction of Niebuhr. The main tenets of political realism are then presented in comparison with Christian Realism. Chapter Four provides an in-depth discussion and definition of Christian Realism. Chapter Five discusses the militant Islamic extremism behind the international terrorism with which the United States is presently at war. Chapter Six, demonstrates the moral framework that Christian Realism provides in responding to international terrorism.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

—1 Peter 3:15

One of the primary responsibilities of a chaplain in the United States Air Force is advising the commander on issues of ethics and morality. While this takes place regularly on a personal level and often in regard to individual cases concerning the discipline of airmen, unfortunately, chaplains are rarely consulted or prepared when it comes to the larger philosophical discussion of war and the application of force. And yet, commanders today are in the unprecedented position of leading the most powerful military force the world has ever seen. This force is now engaged in a type of war few considered possible less than a year ago. International terrorism has taken center stage as the threat to civilization as we know it, just as Nazism and communism did in their day. In addition, a majority of commanders in the Air Force consider themselves to be men and women with spiritual convictions and a majority of these would categorize themselves as Christians. How then does a chaplain fashion a framework for advising Christian commanders on issues of ethics and morality in light of the tremendous power and responsibility they wield and especially as we find ourselves in the midst of a war on terrorism that could last years and even decades?

In an effort to answer this question, the subject of this independent research is Christian Realism's response to international terrorism. I begin with a look at Reinhold Niebuhr, a pastor and theologian considered the twentieth century's foremost advocate of Christian Realism. Interestingly, his theopolitical theory grew and matured just prior to and during World War II. As a result, his insights into how human nature becomes attracted to extreme political movements such as Nazism, bode well for our consideration of terrorism today. Second, I will introduce Christian Realism with a comparative review of the basic principles of political realism as explained by Han J. Morgenthau. Third, I will discuss the main concepts of Christian realism as developed by Niebuhr and conclude with a working definition. I will then define international terrorism, particularly with regards to the radical Islamic beliefs practiced by Osama bin Laden and Al Qa'ida. Finally, I will demonstrate how Christian Realism can provide a framework for advising Christian commanders on moral and ethical issues related to the war on international terrorism.



## Chapter 2

### Reinhold Niebuhr

*These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the **reality**, however, is found in Christ.*

—Colossians 2:17

Pastor, theologian and writer, Reinhold Niebuhr, is considered by many inside and outside academia to be one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. Most protestant pastors have studied his writings in at least one course during their seminary years and depending on one's discipline he is still required reading at many universities. Political commentators and politicians still quote him today.<sup>1</sup> While he was still living, the eminent political realist, Hans J. Morgenthau wrote: "I have always considered Reinhold Niebuhr the greatest living political philosopher of America."<sup>2</sup> It is important then to understand the situations and circumstances that provided the environment in which Niebuhr developed his particular philosophy referred to as Christian Realism.

Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century on June 21, 1892, Reinhold Niebuhr was the fourth child of the Reverend Gustav Niebuhr. Gustav was a pastor in the German Evangelical Synod of North America. The theology of the Niebuhr household was a mixture of the unionism and pietism that grew out of the Prussian Union. Emphasis was placed more on personal Christian commitment, devotion and service to society than to

Christian doctrine and dogma. Confessional differences between denominations were overlooked in favor of working together as a Christian community. The Germans, who immigrated to the United States decades later, brought this blended theology along with them.

Reinhold received a scholarship to Yale Divinity School where he earned a Bachelor of Divinity in 1914 and a Masters the following year. During this time, the prevalent thought in American Protestantism was a concept known as the Social Gospel, which emphasized solving society's problems more through an adherence to the ethics of Jesus than to a proclamation of spiritual salvation by grace through faith. It was primarily this theology that Niebuhr brought to his first and only pastoral position, Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit. Over the next thirteen years he became an articulate spokesman for better working conditions in the factories and the need for better understanding of economic, social and ethnic problems inherent in a burgeoning industrial society. He was a successful pastor, preacher and writer, and his congregation grew from 65 members to over 650.<sup>3</sup>

In 1928, he resigned his pastorate for a teaching position on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York. It was there that a fundamental shift took place in Niebuhr's understanding and application of theology. The academic atmosphere gave him the opportunity to reflect on his theology and experience to the extent that new insights began to emerge. As one Niebuhr biographer describes:

Those insights came to him as he developed, through experience during his years in Detroit, a deeper sense of sin as a social and personal reality. The Pauline understanding of grace had been a part of his Pietist heritage in the Evangelical Synod, but its integration in his life and thought had to await the dissolution, during those years, of his youthful moral idealism. As he turned to theology in the years ahead, he did so with a certain

freedom and a social conscience nurtured in the nondoctrinal character of Pietism and its emphasis on faithful living.<sup>4</sup>

In 1932, Niebuhr's book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, explored the effect that a sinful nature, as explained in theology, had on social and political issues. He was concerned that the liberalism of his day was glossing over a fundamental truth about human nature which Christian theology taught.

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations...They regard social conflict either as an impossible method of achieving morally approved ends or as a momentary expedient which a more perfect education or a purer religion will make unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

A fundamental principle underlying political realism is that the cause of conflict is in man's own nature. This is what conservative theologians call original sin; the reality that man is conceived and born with a sinful human nature that desires its own way. Niebuhr would combine this political thought with a much broader theological treatment giving rise to what came to be called, Christian Realism. Niebuhr described this process in his introduction to *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

The following pages are devoted to the task of analysing the moral resources and limitations of human nature, of tracing their consequences and cumulative effect in the life of human groups and of weighing political strategies in light of the ascertained facts. The ultimate purpose of this task is to find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see in the following pages, Niebuhr concluded that the Gospel of Christianity provides the clearest ethical voice for political realism and gives society its best hope for a better world on both sides of eternity.

## Chapter 3

### The Relationship Between Political Realism and Christian Realism

*God, therefore, has instituted the sword in order to keep everything from perishing.*

—Martin Luther

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the moral framework Christian Realism can provide chaplains when advising commanders on a military response to international terrorism. At this point, it would do well to briefly review the main concepts of political realism as defined by Hans J. Morgenthau, in order to see the relation between political realism and Christian Realism.

Another immigrant from Germany, Morgenthau was a contemporary and admirer of Reinhold Niebuhr. In fact, he listed Niebuhr's, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, as one of his ten most important books,<sup>7</sup> and there has been much debate on the amount of influence Niebuhr may have had on this renowned political theorist. Morgenthau himself said: "You are indeed right in surmising that Reinhold Niebuhr's writings have made a profound impression on me. They have *confirmed certain conclusions at which I arrived at independently* and have contributed to deepening and stimulating my thinking."<sup>8</sup>

Morgenthau's seminal work, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, first appeared in 1948 (seven years after Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of*

*Man*) and listed six fundamental principles of political realism. The first principle states: “Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their root in human nature.”<sup>9</sup> Human nature for Morgenthau, was at best “imperfect” leading to a search for “the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good.”<sup>10</sup>

The difference then with Niebuhr is that Christian Realism sees a spiritual cause to the problem with human nature, rather than simply a natural one. “Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will.”<sup>11</sup> And again: “Only within the terms of the Christian faith can man not only understand the reality of the evil in himself but escape the error of attributing that evil to any one but himself.”<sup>12</sup>

The second principle asserted by Morgenthau was “the concept of interest defined in terms of power.”<sup>13</sup> This means that nation states or their leaders will act on the basis of what is most advantageous to the goal of maintaining and increasing their power over another. Applying this principle prevents muddying the waters of political theory with moral debates. According to Morgenthau: “A realist theory of international politics, then, will guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences.”<sup>14</sup>

The Christian realist accepts this second principle but also believes that understanding such motives and preferences is an important part of understanding the real world. Niebuhr describes the moral dilemma inherent in the exercise of power with the insight that the individual who wants to be moral is often prevented from realizing his goals without resorting to immoral activity.

Sometime they are as anxious to offer moral justifications for the brutalities from which they suffer as for those they commit. The fact that the hypocrisy of man's group behavior...expresses itself not only in terms of self-justification but in terms of moral justification of human behavior in general, symbolises one of the tragedies of the human spirit: its inability to conform its collective life to its individual ideals. As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command.<sup>15</sup>

Morgenthau's third principle of political realism states that "its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the types of political interest pursued and the political power employed may be different from time to time depending upon the situation, but the basic premise remains the same. At first glance, this might seem to be an obvious point. However, when considered against the backdrop of international relations and war, it takes on a much more fundamental tone. For whether it may be an economic interest one time and a military one the next, whatever the interest or power, conflict is inevitable. And so, Niebuhr concluded: "Thus society is in a perpetual state of war."<sup>17</sup>

Understanding this principle enables a realist to clearly discern the differences with other political theories and their implications for the future.

The realist parts company with other schools of thought before the all-important question of how the contemporary world is to be transformed. The realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past as they will the future. The realist cannot be persuaded that we can bring about that transformation by confronting a political reality that has its own laws with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account.<sup>18</sup>

Morgenthau's fourth principle states:

Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action...Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. . . .Realism, then, considers prudence--the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions--to be the supreme virtue in politics.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the political ends justify the means. Christian Realism however, allows neither states nor leaders to hide questionable moral actions behind the excuse of political prudence. Quite the contrary, universal moral principles must be applied to states and individuals alike. Niebuhr tackles this question of moral political action in his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. In chapter four, "The Morality of Nations," he begins with the hypothesis that "group relations can never be as ethical as those which characterise individual relations."<sup>20</sup> From there he expounds the theme that, "perhaps the most significant moral characteristic of a society is hypocrisy,"<sup>21</sup> concluding the chapter with this ringing indictment:

Nations will always find it more difficult to behold the beam that is in their own eye while they observe the mote that is in their brother's eye; and individuals find it difficult enough. A perennial weakness of the moral life in individuals is simply raised to the *n*th degree in national life."<sup>22</sup>

The fifth principle of political realism builds on what it understands as the amorality of states with this rule: "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe."<sup>23</sup> In other words, while not ignoring the reality of morality, Morgenthau warns against political theorist identifying with a particular version. "There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the

blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also."<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, Christian Realism is identified by a philosophy and doctrine that holds the ideals of Christianity as paramount. And yet, it is also this distinction that Niebuhr, the realist, is most effective in calling his fellow Christians back from the idealism and extremism with which it is constantly tempted.

It is a peril to which the church must succumb if it does not constantly hear the challenge of God to Jeremiah to "separate the precious from the vile"; to distinguish between what is genuinely the Lord's will and our will, His holiness and our sin in the work of the Christian Church.<sup>25</sup>

Morgenthau's final principle concludes: "The difference, then, between political realism and other schools of thought is real, and it is profound."<sup>26</sup> It is critical that "the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs."<sup>27</sup> In this way, the theory of political realism remains a viable tool for understanding and predicting political action and behavior. It is a ruler, if you will, for measuring interest defined in terms of power without attempting judgments on whether the length or width meets certain moral standards. The political realist "cannot but subordinate these other standards to those of politics. And he parts company with other schools when they impose standards of thought appropriate to other spheres upon the political sphere."<sup>28</sup>

As I will demonstrate in the following section, Christian realism places the tape measure of political realism firmly in the hands of Christian carpenters and demand that they use it with a complete understanding of human nature; an understanding that realizes the spiritual reality underlying all of mankind's efforts, political or otherwise.



## Chapter 4

### Defining Christian Realism

*One is obliged to concede that in true loftiness of character, Man cannot claim to approach even the meanest of the Higher Animals.*

—Mark Twain

Thus far, I have introduced Christian Realism with a brief comparison to political realism. However, a much more in-depth discussion of what Reinhold Niebuhr meant by Christian Realism is required before arriving at a workable definition that will provide a framework chaplains can use for advising commanders in responding to international terrorism.

Christian Realism is a phrase often read but rarely defined. It appears in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* but one time in the following context: “The Renaissance movement, however, developed another stream of thought which appropriated some of the insights of Christian realism and pessimism.”<sup>29</sup> While not defined in this reference, the inference is that the concepts embodied in what Niebuhr called Christian Realism had been around for a long time. In fact, in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, Niebuhr attributes them to Augustine:

Compared with a Christian realism, which is based on Augustine’s interpretation of biblical faith, a great many modern social and psychological theories, which fancy themselves anti-Platonic or even anti-Aristotelian and which make much of their pretended “realism,” are in fact no more realistic than the classical philosophers.<sup>30</sup>

For Niebuhr, Augustine's *City of God* is the foundation for Christian realist thought. Augustine presented a realistic appraisal of mankind that was in contrast with the classical view of man. The classical view idealized man's unlimited potential because of his ability to reason. According to Niebuhr, "this difference in the viewpoint of Augustine and the classical philosophers lies in Augustine's biblical, rather than rationalistic, conception of human selfhood with the ancillary conception of the seat of evil being in the self."<sup>31</sup>

It comes as no surprise then that Niebuhr's Christian Realism understands first and foremost, that human nature is evil as a result of sin. "The Bible defines sin in both religious and moral terms. The religious definition of sin is man's rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God."<sup>32</sup> This spiritual aspect of man's existence, this spiritual reality if you will, is the distinguishing element in Christian Realism. It is a fact of human existence transcending the natural and the classical understanding of man because these philosophies neither recognize man's unique position in creation, nor the relationship that such a position implies with the Creator. "Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him."<sup>33</sup>

Nor is this reality readily apparent to sinful man on his own. It is a reality, a truth, which must be revealed to him by his Creator. Only God can give mankind the insight into his nature that enables him to understand his unique place in the world and his destiny in history.

It is for this reason that Biblical faith is of such importance for the proper understanding of man, and why it is necessary to correct the interpretations of human nature which underestimate his stature,

depreciate his physical existence and fail to deal realistically with the evil in human nature, in terms of Biblical faith.<sup>34</sup>

This helps explain the error of classical thought which trusts man to overcome his limitations through a civilized society. In reality, the evil within each individual only becomes compounded within society. Human society can never be as moral as the individual and is, in fact, collectively worse, collectively more evil. Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is an in-depth study of this very subject. The following quote demonstrates the extent to which an individual's own sinfulness can be projected upon his relationship to the state:

Unquestionably there is an alloy of projected self-interest in patriotic altruism. The man in the street, with his lust for power and prestige thwarted by his own limitations and the necessities of social life, projects his *ego* upon his nation and indulges his anarchic lusts vicariously.<sup>35</sup>

This sinfulness is also evident in international relationships. "The selfishness of nations is proverbial. It was a dictum of George Washington that nations were not to be trusted beyond their own interest."<sup>36</sup>

For the Christian realist, self-centeredness is a corruption of the divine stamp of individuality. Niebuhr criticizes the renaissance with providing intellectual justification for this particular malady when he writes: "If Protestantism represents the final heightening of the idea of individuality within terms of the Christian religion, the renaissance is the real cradle of that very unchristian concept and reality: the autonomous individual."<sup>37</sup>

What classical philosophy might regard as a virtue, Christian Realism regards as a liability. The autonomous individual is not interested in society for the purpose of improving the world. As a sinner, this is impossible. Quite the contrary, the autonomous

individual is interested in society insofar as society can improve his or her own situation. On this point, Niebuhr is often his most caustic, skewering self pretensions with comments such as: “The question therefore arises how modern man arrived at, and by what means he maintains, an estimate of his virtue in such pathetic contradiction with the obvious facts of history.”<sup>38</sup>

The irony in this situation is that the autonomous individual must organize with other autonomous individuals for any semblance of security or civilization. In other words, order is required for a civilized society, and yet it is an order built upon the sands of doubt and mistrust. “Therefore all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life.”<sup>39</sup> Political realism calls this dilemma a double jeopardy, using it to explain how the defensive actions of nations often escalate into conflict.

But there is more to an orderly society than simply organization. Order must be enforced with power.

Since it is impossible to count on enough moral goodwill among those who possess irresponsible power to sacrifice it for the good of the whole, it must be destroyed by coercive methods and these will always run the peril of introducing new forms of injustice in place of those abolished.<sup>40</sup>

Christian Realism understands this need for power in a sinful world and recognizes the state as a unique creation of God to protect sinful human beings from each other. “The legitimate majesty of government is acknowledged and affirmed in the Christian doctrine of government as a divine ordinance.”<sup>41</sup>

And yet, the power granted government must be wielded with justice. “The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice. The ego which falsely makes itself the centre of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life.”<sup>42</sup> The irony again is that the concept of justice in a

sinful world can never be objective and fair, since those in power also define the concept of justice for their time and situation. Consequently, “the very power which organizes human society and establishes justice, also generates injustice by its preponderance of power.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition, in order to provide justice, arrangements to share power must be made within the government.

The domination of one life by another is avoided most successfully by an equilibrium of powers and vitalities, so that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong. Without a tolerable equilibrium no moral or social restraints ever succeed completely in preventing injustice and enslavement.<sup>44</sup>

The inference for international relations is obvious. This balance of power, first established by individuals within a culture or society for mutual security and protection, becomes the basis for alliances between states.

It is at this point that political realism and Christian Realism part company for Christian Realism insists that justice be tempered with morality. Not that political realists reject the need for morality in society, but their emphasis on “prudence” suggests that the highest standard of preserving power in a particular situation outweighs other moral considerations. Christian Realism challenges this practice and recognizes the hypocrisy inherent in it. “Such a morally neutral definition of political cohesion allows Augustine to compare the harmony of the state with the harmony which thieves maintain among themselves and to suggest that there be little difference except size, between a state and a robber band.”<sup>45</sup>

Christian Realism maintains that not only must the action of government in exercising power and justice be based on what is morally right, but even more

importantly, this morality is best identified with Christianity. In this regard, it is important to note for this study that the concept of a sinful nature is not found in the *Koran*. It is only within Christianity that man is confronted with the reality of sin and his need for a Savior. Only within the framework of Christianity can sinful man hope to provide any semblance of justice tempered with morality, for it is only within Christianity that sinful man is confronted with the reality of God's own justice and mercy.

The heart of the Christian Gospel is that God Himself, in the Person of His eternal Son, Jesus Christ, sacrificed Himself for sinful man. In God's divine justice, Jesus overcame man's failure to live up to his created perfection, suffered the consequence of man's sin on the cross and rose from the dead to announce God's forgiveness. This is the essence of the Christian doctrine of grace. God then works through the proclamation of this Good News to change sinful, self-centered human beings into repentant, forgiven and service oriented human beings who recognize each other's real worth and real potential. This is possible only by faith in a living Christ who empowers each individual with a new perspective on life and a new motivation for his behavior. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."<sup>46</sup>

What was once an autonomous individual, looking out for his own interest now becomes an individual struggling by faith to live up to God's expectations of him. "This is the religious emphasis upon love as the highest virtue...The religious ethic, (the Christian ethic more particularly, though not solely) insists that the needs of the neighbor shall be met, without a careful computation of relative needs."<sup>47</sup> In this Gospel, Niebuhr

centers Christian Realism and declares: “The agape, the sacrificial love, which is for Christian faith revealed upon the Cross, has as its primary justification in an ‘essential reality’ which transcends the realities of history, namely, the character of God.”<sup>48</sup>

In summary then we define Christian Realism as a political theory that understands that evil exists as a result of sin and therefore, each individual is by nature sinful and evil. Left unchecked, sinful natures will eventually resort to extreme behavior to secure their desires. Therefore, to prevent mankind’s self-destruction, God divinely established government to provide order in human society and to enforce that order by the exercise of power. However, that power must be tempered with justice and that justice must be moral. The morality that best governs justice is Christianity, which seeks the ideal of Christ Himself. This is possible only by faith and therefore only exercised by Christians who understand that they are sinners who have been redeemed by the grace of God.

The man on the cross turned defeat into victory and prophesied the day when love would have to come through the intervention of God. The moral resources of men would not be sufficient to guarantee it. A sentimental generation has destroyed this apocalyptic note in the vision of the Christ. It thinks the kingdom of God is around the corner, while he regarded it as impossible of realisation, except by God’s grace.<sup>49</sup>

This definition lays the foundation for understanding the difference between Christian Realism and the brand of international terrorism that justifies its violence by its extreme allegiance to Islam. The next chapter examines this allegiance and demonstrates how Islam’s understanding of salvation by works, rather than grace, leads to another classic example of how sinful human beings mistakenly believe they can convince God of their own righteousness by condemning and attacking the unrighteousness of others.

## Chapter 5

### International Terrorism and Jihad

*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*

—Jesus

In order for Christian chaplains to advise Christian commanders on moral dilemmas faced in combating terrorism, it is important to have an understanding of what makes a terrorist resort to violence in the first place. As we have already seen in our discussion of Christian Realism, sinful man often attempts to find ultimate justification for his actions in his religious faith. Niebuhr understood from his own experiences and study that Christianity is no stranger to extremism and must confess many horrific examples of violence conducted in the name of Jesus. As we shall see in the following discussion, Islam suffers from the same elements of extremism.

At the outset, it is important to note a fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam. While there are 22 references for “sinful nature” in the Christian New Testament, there is no concept of a sinful nature in the Koran. Islam teaches that human beings sin against God, but the phrase “sinful nature” never occurs in the Koran. Sin is simply disobedience to the commands of the law. Consider the implications this has on a Muslim’s behavior.



Islam is a theology of works-righteousness. In other words, a believer enters heaven based on good works. The five pillars of Islam are centered upon the individual's responsibility to recite the *Shahada*, pray five times a day, give to the poor, fast during Ramadan and make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime. Doing these five things secures one's salvation. However, as with any works-righteous theology, Muslims can never be certain of their eternal salvation. They must simply hope that they have done enough to please God when they meet Him on judgment day. It is easy to see then, how someone wanting to please God and secure their own salvation might be tempted to pursue radical, legalistic and violent reforms of culture and society deemed offensive and detrimental to Islam. The terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, believe that we are a threat to their religion and culture. That is why they consider us hated enemies and are convinced that their only recourse is violence.

While international terrorism takes many forms, the focus of this study is the particular brand with which we find ourselves at war: the radical Islamic terrorism promoted by Osama bin Laden. Radical Islamic terrorists are extremists who demand uncompromising allegiance to Islam and advocate violence in defense of it. The following quote from an interview with Osama bin Laden demonstrates this thinking:

America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal. The Islamic Sharia (law) says Muslims should not live in the land of the infidel for long. The September 11 attacks were not targeted at women and children. The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power.<sup>50</sup>

Osama bin Laden is a leader of Al-Qa'ida, which he established in 1988. The purpose of Al-Qa'ida is captured in this quote from the *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*:

...the latest and the greatest of [the] aggressions, incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet . . . is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places - the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims — by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.<sup>51</sup>

The goal of Al-Qa'ida is straightforward enough: “Cleansing of the Muslim countries from corrupt and secular leadership, and fight against the powers that threaten Muslim states and the holy places of Islam.”<sup>52</sup> This mission to cleanse the Muslim countries derives from the Islamic fundamentalism practiced by Osama bin Laden known as Wahhabism. The Encyclopedia of the Orient defines Wahhabism as a “movement in Islam from mid-18th century, calling for a renewal of the Muslim spirit, with cleansing of the moral, and removal of all innovations to Islam.”<sup>53</sup> The Taliban’s destruction of the ancient Buddhist statues is just one example of this practice. But to cleanse the Muslim countries requires more than prayer and the destruction of a few historic icons. According to Bin Laden: “The Israeli forces occupy our land and the American troops are on our territory. We have no other option but to launch jihad.”<sup>54</sup>

The Islamic term jihad, or holy war, has several different connotations. Bin Laden puts this particular spin on it:

We are carrying on the mission of our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The mission is to spread the word of God, not to indulge in massacring people. We ourselves are the target of killings, destruction and atrocities. We are only defending ourselves. This is defensive jihad (holy war). We want to defend our people and our land. That is why I say that if we don't get security, the Americans, too, would not get security.<sup>55</sup>

To conduct this jihad against the United States, bin Laden and his followers established numerous Al Qa'ida cells throughout the world, run terrorist training camps and continue

to direct several violent attacks against the against U.S. military and civilians, killing thousands.

Christian Realism understands this extremism from the following perspective:

The will-to-live becomes the will-to-power. Only rarely does nature provide armors of defense which cannot be transmuted into instruments of aggression. The frustrations of the average man, who can never realise the power and the glory which his imagination sets as the ideal, make him the more willing tool and victim of the imperial ambitions of his group.<sup>56</sup>

In the extreme, this frustrated will-to-power translates into suicide bombers who hope to achieve glory if not in this life, then the next. The Christian realist should understand and expect that without the concept of a sinful nature, which places every individual under the same condemnation, the extreme elements of Islam have no choice but to attack the evil they perceive in others in a misguided effort to prove themselves less evil, or even holy, in comparison.

In Niebuhr's day, there were similar examples of extremism during the Russian Revolution:

The terrorists were diseased idealists, so morbidly oppressed by the guilt of violence resting upon their class, that they imagined it possible to atone for that guilt by deliberately incurring guilt in championing the oppressed. Their ideas were ethical and, to a degree, religious, though they regarded themselves as irreligious.<sup>57</sup>

Nor should we make the mistake of thinking such extremism is non-existent in societies that are more democratic. Niebuhr warns us, "the sentiment of patriotism achieves a potency in the modern soul, so unqualified, that the nation is given *carte blanche* to use the power, compounded of the devotion of individuals, for any purpose it desires."<sup>58</sup> A Christian realist should therefore recognize the inherent danger in our own sinful natures when crafting a response to terrorism.

As a result of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Congress authorized President Bush to unleash whatever means he deemed appropriate to conduct America's war on terrorism. While political, legal, law enforcement and economic instruments of power continue to be utilized in this counterstrike, the most visible means of retaliation remains the U.S. military. At present there are approximately 3,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan with thousands more in the region. President Bush has repeatedly said this is a different kind of war and that other nations harboring and supporting terrorists will face retribution. The future for the U.S. military is increased operations and the almost certain invasion of other countries such as Iraq.

History teaches us that the longer the war, the more important the moral framework in which it is waged. The next chapter of this paper demonstrates how Christian Realism provides such a moral framework.

## Chapter 6

### The Moral Framework

*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.*

—2 Corinthians 10:3

The moral framework provided by Christian Realism begins with an understanding of human nature. Contrary to Islam and its militant stepchild, Wahhabism, Christian Realists understand that human nature is sinful and that human beings are inherently evil. Reason does not give us the ability to overcome this spiritual calamity. Rather, left to our own, we would easily destroy ourselves through constant conflict and chaos. However, God in His grace has provided both salvation and security: Salvation in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and security in the concept of His law embodied in the State. And yet, while forgiveness for sins is granted by grace during our lifetimes, perfection is not. The world has been redeemed, not perfected. We do not live in a Christian State anymore than we can hope realistically to live in a Christian world. Jesus described this spiritual reality when He said that His disciples find themselves in the world but “not of the world.”<sup>59</sup> He commissioned His disciples to change the world through a proclamation of the Gospel, not by force.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, Christian Realists are neither surprised nor confused about another religion taking up the sword against what many U.S. citizens consider a benign and even

benevolent society, more intent on succeeding and enjoying life than harming others.

Niebuhr points out:

Even religious communities, if they are sufficiently large, and if they deal with issues regarded as vital by their members, resort to coercion to preserve their unity. Religious organizations have usually availed themselves of a covert type of coercion (excommunication and the interdict) or they have called on the police power of the state.<sup>61</sup>

Unfortunately, Christian history is also replete with examples of similar religious fanaticism. Niebuhr illustrates this point in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* by quoting Waldo Frank's description of a Spanish conquistador, in *America Hispana*:

Only a man who believes can do what he did. He has seen cheap wine turn to the blood of Christ; now he can understand how his own bestialities are transfigured into acts which build the Church of Rome. Within his cruelties is the intuition of his destiny as an agent of the divine. His mystic role makes his impossible adventure bearable, and makes him bearable to himself."<sup>62</sup>

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* we read this analysis:

The fanatic fury of religious controversies, the hatred engendered in theological disputes, the bitterness of ecclesiastical rivalries and the pretentious claims of ecclesiastical dominion all reveal the continued power of sin in the life of the 'redeemed'; and the use which sin makes of the pretension of holiness.<sup>63</sup>

The moral lesson for Christian leaders, especially those who find themselves wielding power over life and death, is sobering. "For the pride of the wise and the pretensions of the spiritual leaders of culture and civilization may be more productive of evil than the simpler will-to-power of the mighty and the noble."<sup>64</sup>

Ironically, in response to the attacks of September 11, America has embraced its own version of defensive jihad on behalf of its culture and values. The challenge is to balance the need for defense of our citizens and justice for the victims and their families without succumbing to acts of evil and terror ourselves. And lest we think too highly of ourselves

in this regard, Niebuhr's Christian Realism would remind us how fine a line separates us from Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The religious instinct for the absolute is no less potent in patriotic religion than in any other. The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process.<sup>65</sup>

One has only to recall the misguided diatribe of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, suggesting that the terrorist attacks were Divine judgment upon certain segments of American society (i.e., homosexuality) to realize the truth of this statement.

Terrorism based on religious beliefs is an ultimate example of man's hypocrisy and sin. "Such spirit can be most simply defined as demonic. The most striking, contemporary form of it is a religious nationalism in which race and nation assume the eminence of God and demand unconditioned devotion."<sup>66</sup>

The moral framework of Christian Realism insists that because we are all equally evil in God's eyes, and because God still loves us enough to redeem us, we have an obligation to love even our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."<sup>67</sup> And this is precisely where Christian soldiers and officers are confronted with the struggle to understand this key element of their faith in light of their military duty. How does a chaplain advise Christian officers and commanders as they respond with force in this war against terrorism?

By acknowledging with them that life in a sinful world is not nearly as much a choice between good and evil as it is a choice between several evils. Niebuhr's advice,

based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant is that “truth is judged by its harmonious relation to a previously discovered system of truths, so the morality of an action is judged by the possibility of conforming it to a universal scheme of consistent moral actions.”<sup>68</sup> A perfect example would be the concept of proportionality within the Just War theory. As commanders plan attacks against terrorists with precision weapons, they are following centuries of practice founded in Christianity which teaches that restraint is a measure of morality.

The Biblical foundation for this exercise of power is well known:

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.<sup>69</sup>

It is important to note that *how* one bears the sword is a matter left to the ruler or State. God gives us the opportunity to wield power with justice which is in turn tempered with mercy as we reflect on His example of applying power and justice and mercy towards us. Recognizing the inherent temptation to respond to acts of evil in kind, enables the Christian realist to practice even the military art of war without resorting to extreme acts of murder and mayhem directed against an adversary's noncombatant population, their industry or culture. Indeed, it is this theological insight into man's sinful nature that ensures Christian realists will insist on strict restraints in crafting a response to international terrorism so that we do not become the very evil we claim to be fighting against.



## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

*I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice!  
And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no  
virtue!*

—Barry Goldwater

It is, perhaps, unnerving to realize how much one's life may be a factor in the events of current history. The men and women who serve in the military of the United States of America are at just such an apex. We are members of the most powerful military the world has ever seen. We have been blessed with what was denied Alexander, Julius Caesar and Napoleon: the military power to rule the world. And yet, America restrains herself from the ambitions of imperialism.

The tension created by such moral restraint is constantly being challenged. Can our nation overcome similar temptations to extremism? In the wake of September 11, 2001, it would be easy for us to justify barbarity in kind. But we chose a different path; a path that reflects a spiritual heritage as much as a physical one. And yet, my experience of over 21 years as a chaplain in the United States Air Force is that scant attention is given to that spiritual heritage and its implications for our current military actions.

Based on this research, however, I am confident that the principles of Christian Realism are significant signposts to help us reclaim and reapply that heritage. They help Christian officers and commanders understand an enemy like Osama bin Laden. And

while they may struggle to understand Jesus' imperative to love such an enemy<sup>70</sup>, they realize that before the judgment seat of God, we are no better and no worse. We simply have a revelation of life which transcends this world, enabling us to better understand our fellowman and inspiring us to make choices that consider his welfare along with our own.

Niebuhr has this to say about the faith of the majority of Air Force officers:

Consequently it is only in a prophetic religion, as in Christianity, that individuality can be maintained. This faith alone does justice to both the natural and the spiritual bases of individuality. Since it takes history seriously, it affirms the significance of the distinctive character achieved by each individual within the tensions of historical existence, tensions have their root in natural, geographic, economic, racial, national and sexual conditions. But since it interprets history from the standpoint of the eternal (*i.e.* since it sees the source and end of history beyond history) it gives the individual a place to stand within a world of meaning, even when and if the particular historical movement into which he is integrated should fail completely.<sup>71</sup>

As Christian chaplains consider how best to advise Christian commanders and officers on issues of ethics and morality, particularly in response to international terrorism, they have a tremendous resource in the teachings of their faith. In the face of the political extremists of his day, represented by such ideologies as Nazism, Fascism, and communism, Reinhold Niebuhr concluded that the Gospel of Christianity provides the clearest ethical voice for political realism and gives society its best hope for a better world on both sides of eternity. The result of his reflection and writing was a new synthesis of political and theological thought called Christian Realism.

Going beyond political realism, Christian Realism requires a complete understanding of human nature; an understanding that realizes the *spiritual* reality underlying all of mankind's efforts, political or otherwise. Consequently, we define Christian Realism as a political theory that understands that evil exists as a result of sin and therefore, each

individual is by nature sinful and evil. Because sinful natures are self-centered, they are also capable of extreme behavior to satisfy their desires. But God, in His grace, established government to protect mankind from himself. Every government has a Divine mandate to provide order in human society and to enforce that order by the exercise of power. That power must be tempered with justice and that justice must be moral. Christian realists believe the morality that best governs justice is Christianity, which seeks the ideal of Christ Himself. This is possible only by faith and therefore only exercised by Christians who understand that they are sinners who have been redeemed by the grace of God through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At the other end of the theological spectrum, the Islamic extremism of Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban demands that each individual earn God's favor if they want a chance at eternal life. The threat to the individual is seen primarily as an external threat. Only by the removal of the evil in society, those external temptations that impede mankind's pursuit of perfection, can the individual have a chance at achieving the perfection God's law demands. The Christian realist is able to understand then and expect that without the concept of a sinful nature, which places the root of evil within the individual and therefore every individual under the same condemnation of sin, the extreme elements of Islam have no choice but to attack the evil they perceive in others in a misguided effort to prove themselves less evil, or even holy, in comparison.

How then does a Christian chaplain advise Christian officers and commanders as they respond with force in this war against terrorism? What moral framework does Christian Realism provide in this situation? The reality that life in a sinful world is not as simple as a choice between good and evil. More often, it is a choice between varying

degrees of evil. That stark realism is a difficult fact for most people to accept. However, the Christian's realist's relationship with God, granted by His grace and realized by faith in Jesus Christ, gives one a different perspective than most of the world. Indeed, it is this theological insight into man's sinful nature that ensures Christian realists will insist on strict restraints in crafting a response to international terrorism so that we do not become the very evil we claim to be fighting against. God's justice, tempered with mercy, calls us to a higher standard.

In this way, Christian Realism provides a powerful moral framework for incorporating faith into the discussion of the application of military power and enables Christian chaplains to advise Christian commanders as they wield that great power. To that end, may we be bold to say with Reinhold Niebuhr: "The new world must be built by resolute men who 'when hope is dead will hope by faith'; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good."<sup>72</sup> Then, and only then, will we be worthy of the opportunity this moment in time affords us, and with God's providence achieve a victory established in truth.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, see David Brooks, "The Age of Conflict" *Weekly Standard*, (November 5, 2001), 19-23.

<sup>2</sup> Harold R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (Greenwich: The Seabury Press, 1962), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), xx..

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 113.

## Notes

- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 112. (Emphasis added by author)
- <sup>9</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1:16.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>13</sup> Morgenthau, 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Morgenthau, 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Morgenthau, 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 19.
- <sup>18</sup> Morgenthau, 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Morgenthau, 1960, p 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 83
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 95.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>23</sup> Morgenthau, 11.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 225.
- <sup>26</sup> Morgenthau, 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>29</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:277.
- <sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 123-124.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:179.
- <sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:131.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 93.
- <sup>36</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 84.
- <sup>37</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:61.
- <sup>38</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:95.
- <sup>39</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:182.
- <sup>40</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 21.
- <sup>41</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:267.
- <sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:179.
- <sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:21.
- <sup>44</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:265.
- <sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:273.
- <sup>46</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10.
- <sup>47</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 57.

## Notes

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:96.

<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Hamid Mir, "Interview with Osama bin Laden" *Urdu Daily Ausaf*, 10 November 2001, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 December 2001, available from <http://www.dawn.com/2001/11/10/top1/htm>.

<sup>51</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Al-Qa'ida" *Encyclopaedia of the Orient*, September 17, 2001, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 December 2001, available from <http://lexicorient.com/cgi-bin/eo-direct.pl?qaida.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Wahhabism / Muwahhidun" *Encyclopaedia of the Orient*, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 December 2001, available from <http://lexicorient.com/cgi-bin/eo-direct.pl?wahhabis.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Mir.

<sup>55</sup> Mir.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>59</sup> John 17:16.

<sup>60</sup> "Go make disciples of all nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching everything I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19,20.

<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:219-220.

<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:224.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 96-97.

<sup>66</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:111.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 5:44.

<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> Romans 13:3,4.

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 1:69.

<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature*, 2:285-286.

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